

Divergence on the Lectionary - First Sunday after Pentecost - Trinity Sunday, Year A

First Reading

Genesis 1:1-2:4a (last half of verse 4 added in italics)

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens." So God created the great sea

creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so. And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (ESV)

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

These are the generations
of the heavens and the earth when they were created,

in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens. (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Corinthians 13:11–13

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 28:16–20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

When I sat down to write for Trinity Sunday I thought to myself, “Self, aren’t you glad you’re just writing something to help stimulate Bible Study, and not trying to preach again on the Trinity!” And I answered myself, “Yes, self, I am.” And then I began trying to write something interesting about the first chapter of Genesis (and a few verses of the second) and I thought, “Self, this was supposed to be easier!”

I’ve been through several articles on Genesis 1 (jstor.org is a fabulous resource, and free) and I don’t have any one idea to offer that is really compelling (to me) so I’m going to toss out a few that I’ve come across and hope that one sticks for you.

First, the Hebrew of verse one is unclear. Where we read “In *the* beginning,” the noun for beginning is “anarthrous.” That is, it lacks an article, the word “the.” While some scholars argue that the article can be inferred from the syntax, others suggest that this is in part because we are imposing rules from English on ancient Hebrew that don’t fit, and that read against other anarthrous constructions in Hebrew, it is better to read it as indefinite, rather than definite. That is to say, we’re better off reading this as one stage of beginning, not THE beginning. There is enough scholarly agreement on this point (in general if not in detail) that I think it’s worth taking into consideration. The difficulty is that it’s nearly impossible to render this indefinite sense of beginning into English.

Next, “each, according to its kind” should probably not be translated that way when the author of Genesis gets to talking about the creation of animals and plants. The Hebrew preposition we have translated that way in many translations (and the ones I best remember) is better translated the way the NRSV has it, “of every kind.”

And then we have the order of things created. Humankind is placed last, not just as the pinnacle of God’s creative effort, but specifically to undermine the pantheon of other animal gods that populated the world of the ancient Jews. Think of the “golden calf” and realize that gods took many “lesser” forms, lesser than human. Genesis sets humankind above them all.

Finally, and this one was the most interesting to me, when Genesis 1 speaks of humankind being created “in God’s image,” it means far more than I had thought. For me, and for many Christians, this has meant that we go about the earth as God’s representatives, and visual symbols of God’s presence, but to the writer of Genesis and to the readers/hearers of Genesis, the “image” of a god, or of God, participated in the very being of its referent. To be created in the image of God made one more than just a statue or painting. It makes us “little Gods.” Those are my words, and I may not have that exactly right, but it’s how I understand the way that mindset worked. And that makes sense of the way that the order of creation I mentioned above sets us above other “gods” that had animal forms.

I haven’t even begun to unpack what that means for me as a believer. I invite you to ponder it, and if you have some time, share your thoughts in the comments?

Second Reading

Many of you will be hearing this read on Sunday from the NRSV. It has the better translation. There aren’t many differences, and only one of any note, but where the ESV has “aim at restoration,” it really just says, “be restored.” And where the ESV has “comfort one another” and the NRSV has “listen to my appeal (??)” it really just says, “be comforted.”

The more I read these statements in the imperative mood (the verb’s mood) the more I see Paul releasing restoration and comfort, not commanding it. In the same way that Jesus spoke healing by simply saying “Be healed,” I hear Paul saying, “be comforted” or “be restored.” I really believe that we who are “in Christ” have the authority to speak these realities into the lives of others. They can be resisted, but in speaking them we release presence and possibility that wasn’t there before. Here, in the closing words of

this letter (though it's likely a composite of a number of his letters to Corinth) Paul releases blessing, peace, comfort, restoration, agreement.

Do we have the faith, the audacity to release similar words over people?

Gospel Text

It's a small wonder that we have had so many readings from John during Easter season in Year A. This is the only resurrection appearance that Matthew relates apart from His appearance to the women on Easter Day. It feels like the moment immediately prior to His ascension, but we aren't even given that.

We know so many of the stories of the resurrection appearances that our minds fill in the missing bits, but stop for a moment and try to imagine what it was like for Matthew's congregation, whose only version of the Gospel was this one. We hear the report from the women at the tomb and then wham! We're at the mountain top, Jesus sends us out to make disciples of all nations and wham! The curtain comes down.

Did Matthew know of other resurrection appearances and just leave them out? Or had he, as the first writer of a Gospel (which I believe to be true) not yet heard them? I'm not sure which it is. Luke and John have such rich traditions in them concerning the time between Jesus' resurrection and ascension, it's difficult for me to imagine Matthew omitting them if he knew them, except that Mark was even more abrupt. We'll come to that during this season of next year, Year B, but in brief, Mark's original version of the Gospel ended with 16:8, without any resurrection appearance at all. And that was clearly intentional.

If that is so, then it's possible for me to believe that Matthew, having heard at least some of the stories of Jesus' appearances to His followers after His resurrection, chose to relate only this one so as to focus his readers' attention on it. And what does he want them to focus on? Spreading the Gospel to "all nations."

Matthew, who is careful to show us that during His lifetime Jesus was so focused on His own people that when he sent the Twelve out in chapter ten He told them to "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans," has radically shifted gears. There are hints of the Gentile mission to come elsewhere in the Gospel, but here it is stated without any ambiguity. The noun translated as "nations" here is the same noun translated as "Gentiles" elsewhere in the Gospel.

Imagine again the impact of these words on Matthew's largely Jewish-Christian congregation. The call to leave their Jewish comfort-zone and venture out into a hostile

world, proclaiming the Good News to peoples who had no context for a Jewish Messiah who had come to save them as well. And these are the last words we hear before Jesus vanishes.

There are two ways I think these words can be heard. The first way reminds me of that embarrassing “Decade of Evangelism” that the Episcopal Church undertook, back in the 90’s, I think. These words, “Go!” and “Tell!” fell appallingly flat because they came from above somewhere as commands to go and do something for which we had no real motivation, let alone real teaching. How many of us, even today, hear Jesus’ words to go and make disciples of “all nations” and still squirm?

The second way of hearing this is the way I think it was meant to be heard in Matthew, and the reason Matthew stops with this singular resurrection appearance. Imagine now standing in the glorious presence of the Resurrected Lord, mouth agape, heart pounding as the very earth under your feet seems to be shaken by the new reality that is opened to you. “Death is conquered, we are free, Christ has won the victory!” In this context I hear Jesus’ words here like the words of a beloved teacher to her primary school students, who have just discovered something utterly baffling and wonderful. “Okay, children, now go tell everybody you see! Go on, go! Don’t keep this to yourselves!” Jesus isn’t sending them out to do something that feels frightening and foreign, but giving them permission and direction to do what their hearts cry out to do already.

I think that the work of evangelism would be so much easier if we could recapture that sense of joy and wonder that must have been the atmosphere into which the Great Commission was spoken. Every word of Scripture takes on new and marvelous meaning if it is read in the light of this moment. Every word spoken by the Christian takes on new and chain-breaking power when it is delivered from that mountain top.

“Now, go on, children! Go! Tell everybody else!” And we all run from the building, shouting at the top of our lungs, “He is Risen!”